DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 114 345 SO 008 724

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TITLE Implications for Curriculum and Instruction of Student Perceptions of Contemporary and Future Society and Social Studies Courses.
PUB DATE Nov 75
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies (Atlanta, Georgia, November 26-29, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Assessment; Educational Objectives; Educational Research; Educational Trends; *Futures (of Society); National Surveys; Participant Satisfaction; Relevance (Education); Secondary Education; *Social Change; Social Problems; *Social Studies; Sociocultural Patterns; *Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

In an effort to determine how students themselves perceive social studies and the society, two questionnaires were developed and administered to 797 seniors in 19 high schools across the country. The first questionnaire surveyed student comparison of social studies with other school subjects; assessment of preference for various teaching methods and materials; and evaluation of such course characteristics as realism, analytic emphasis, and objectives. The second questionnaire measured student attitudes toward contemporary and future American society and included questions on family, marriage, and sex roles; physical needs and public services; social class and status; social implications of religion; jobs and education; racial and ethnic relations; and crime and violence. The results indicated a generally positive view of social studies courses in comparison to other courses in the curriculum. Most students preferred discussion to any other form of teaching method and liked lectures the least. In viewing present and future society, all students, except for those of lower socioeconomic background, anticipated highly significant changes in the future. The students saw job preparation as a major purpose of contemporary education. (Author/DE)

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IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF CONTEMPORARY AND FUTURE SOCIETY AND SOCIAL STUDIES COURSES

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Read at:
National Council for Social Studies
November, 1975

In a period of declining academic achievement and purported adolescent disillusionment with American culture and society, how do students themselves perceive the social studies and the society? What societal characteristics do they anticipate that their generation will produce? Are student perceptions influenced by their sex, race, religion, or the socioeconomic status of their family? What curricular and instructional implications are suggested by their responses?

To attempt to answer these questions, two questionnaires were developed. One containing twenty-nine items enabled comparison of social studies with other school subjects, assessment of preference for various teaching methods and materials, and evaluation of such course characteristics as realism, analytic emphasis, and objectives. The second contained thirty-seven items to which students responded twice, once with reference to the contemporary American society and once with reference to future American society. Future was defined as approximately the time they reached their parents present age. Seven topic areas were included:

1. Family, marriage, and sex roles.
2. Physical needs and public services.
3. Social class and status.
4. Social implications of religion.
5. Jobs and education.
6. Racial and ethnic relations.
7. Crime and violence.

The 797 subjects were enrolled in nineteen high schools, with the Southwest not represented, the Southeast and Far West underrepresented, and the North East and Middle West overrepresented. By sex 372 were male, 425 were female. As classified by their sociology teacher as to their academic ability, 236 had high ability, 442 were average, and 119 were low. Again as classified by these teachers as to their socioeconomic class, 131 were high, 600 middle, and 66 lower class. All teachers making these ratings were trained and experienced sociology teachers who had previously been selected in nation-wide competition to participate in a NSF summer institute. All had taken the same graduate sociology course in which factors included in socioeconomic class categorization were a part of the course content.

As to religious background, 501 were Protestant, 207 were Catholic, and 89 had some other religious background. By race, 761 were Caucasian, only 30 were Negro, and 6 were of another race. All of the black students were enrolled in Georgia schools. For whatever reason of selection, this group cannot be considered sufficiently representative of blacks to permit comparisons by race. The number of students classified as being from the lower socioeconomic class is lower than probability would suggest. This may have resulted from teacher reluctance to so classify students or the schools where these teachers work may in fact have a low proportion of these students.

The data were collected in May in sociology courses comprised almost entirely of senior students. Questionnaires were administered in class by the teacher. Rankings of ability and socioecomic class were estimates made by the sociology teachers. The group of students cannot be regarded as an accurate national sample, but it was sufficiently heterogeneous except for race to provide useful generalizations.

As compared with other high school courses, social studies courses were perceived as:

1. Using a wider variety of teaching materials and methods.
2. Requiring more student decision making.
3. Requiring more outside reading.
4. Having somewhat clearer objectives.
5. Being more interesting.
6. Having more practical value.
7. Making much more use of discussion as a teaching method.
8. Using more audio-visual materials.

Social studies courses were rated as being about the same as others in two respects:

1. Reliance on the basic text.
2. Level of difficulty of courses.

In no respect were social studies courses rated worse than others. Students agreed that social studies courses:

1. Teach how to understand future events.
2. Teach how to analyze a society.
3. Require drawing conclusions from data.
4. Give fair and adequate treatment to minority groups.
5. Are realistic.
6. Give an adequate explanation of other cultures.
7. In history, courses have reasonably clear purposes.
8. In social science, courses have even clearer purposes.
9. Are liked slightly better than other courses, with the social sciences being liked more than history.
10. Include about the same use of essay tests as other courses.

Social studies teachers were perceived:

1. To have the same level of competence as other teachers.

2. To be slightly more concerned about students than other teachers.

When provided with five objectives of social studies teachers, the students selected as the major objective of their teachers the percentage noted:

How to use information to draw conclusions - 48%

Recall information to pass exams - 25%

Discussion of social issues without drawing conclusions - 14%

Good citizenship - 6%

Maintaining a quiet, orderly class - 6%

Despite the generally favorable reaction to social studies, it seems apparent that nearly one-third see as the major objective one whose relevance they might well question.

Student ratings of preferred teaching procedures probably could be predicted by most experienced teachers. They were:

	Discussion	Lecture	Audio-Visual	Independent Projects	Group Work
Like Best	41%	4	26	11	17
Second	19	11	28	16	26
Third	16	17	25	21	21
Fourth	17	20	15	31	17
Like Least	5	50	5	20	17%

(Lines and columns do not always total 100% because of rounding)

Females differed from males in a stronger liking for social science than for history (.001 level of significance). Males more than females perceived social studies as using a wider variety of methods and materials than other courses (.001 level) and saw social studies teachers as more concerned about students than did females (.021 level). As previously noted, the inadequate sample of black students did not permit racial comparisons. Only one important difference by religion occurred. Protestant background students significantly more than those of Catholic background perceived heavy use of audio-visual materials (.001 level). Many Catholic students in the sample were enrolled in parochial schools ineligible for federal funds that were available for equipment and materials purchase in public schools.

High ability students had a significantly clearer perception of the purpose of history than both middle (.001 level) and low ability students (.0007 level). The same was true of social science, with the difference between them and both other groups significant at the .001 level. Teachers did adopt to needs of low ability students by relying less on a basic text. This significant difference between high and low ability students was at .005 level. Less use of essay tests also was reported by low ability students (.026 and .001 levels for the difference between low ability and high and middle ability respectively). High and middle ability students liked social studies better than other courses; low ability students liked them about the same. Differences were significant between low and high ability (.004 level) and low and middle (.046 level). High ability students differed significantly from low ability in better seeing social studies as being helpful in understanding future events (.004 level).

Lower socioeconomic class students reported less reliance on basic texts than did middle class students (.03 level), and less use of essay tests (.005 level). Both high (.017 level) and middle (.012 level) liked social studies courses better than low SES students. High SES students saw the purposes of social science more clearly than middle class (.017 level) and lower class students (.001 level). Middle also were superior to low (.003 level). Middle class students believed social studies teachers to be slightly superior to other teachers; both high and low groups thought them slightly inferior. High and middle differed significantly (.24 level) as did low and middle (.040 level).

In general, mean student reactions to social studies courses and teachers were positive, and differences among students were logical. However, mean scores did obscure the responses of a small minority of negative students. The systematic and sometimes illogical negativism of this group gave an unverified impression that their negative responses might well be toward the total school rather than the social studies. A positive note was the evidence that social studies teachers did attempt to adjust school experiences to the needs of low ability students.

In viewing present and future society, highly significant changes were anticipated in all but one of the thirty-seven characteristics investigated. Students see marriage as a rather unstable institution at present and expect no change in future. Whether they are realists or pessimists is uncertain.

Students see contemporary society as sexist but the future as sexually egualitarian. The magnitude of change was greater than for any other social characteristic. Both sexes, all religions, and all levels of ability and SES anticipate this change. The present society also is seen as racist. The magnitude of change expected was the second greatest, but even that change resulted in the group being almost evenly divided in their future expectation as to whether the society will be characterized by racism. This was reflected in all three race related items concerning bias, effect of race on social status, and effect on economic status. All categories of students shared these views, with all changes reported significant at the .001 level of confidence.

In other family traits, present parental control of adolescents found students almost evenly divided as to whether much control is exerted. A significant change to less control is expected. Communication between parents and adolescents is seen as a current problem; significant change is expected, but a small majority expect a continued problem. Students consider marriage presently to occur at a young age, with a significant shift to a later age. Both males and females expect this change, but females significantly more than males expect it. Presently, sex roles are viewed as quite different, and a significant shift toward undifferentiated roles is expected by all categories of students. Social restraints on sexual behavior perceived at present are anticipated to relax in future. Only lower socioeconomic class students do not expect a significant change. This cannot be accounted for by their seeing the present society as sexually permissive; they do not. Parents now raise children as they were raised; a significant change is expected. Beliefs of parents and adolescents are different now, and are expected to remain so in future. However, a significant change toward congruity is expected.

In most respects related to family, marriage, and sex roles, students appear to expect the future society to be more permissive, more equalitarian, and by current adolescent norms, improved. The general optimism was tempered somewhat by the expectation that marriage will continue to be an unstable institution. Their apparent realism about future marriage and parent-adolescent conflict lends some credance to their apparent optimism about the probability of other changes.

Students did not believe that the present society provides for all persons adequate medical care, care for mental health problems, physical needs for the aged, or the opportunity for a "good life" for all. Signigicant changes for the better were expected. In each respect, it was anticipated that the future society would meet these needs adequately except for uncertainty about whether there would be a "good life" available to all.

A marginal note on one answer sheet appeared to sum up the expectations for the future. "We will be a socialist society." Whether the present adolescent generation will be willing to pay the tax bill for the services they expect of society remains to be seen of course, but a significant change in the relationship between income and job held is expected. The present society is viewed as having an economic system in which income varies widely with job; in future, that relationship is expected to diminish significantly but not disappear. Students did seem to be aware that some of the social changes they desire will be expensive.

In their views about social class, students saw social class at present as having status influenced by income, race, material possessions and status of one's parents. Social mobility was seen as difficult and slow; neighborhoods were perceived as very homogeneous. Significant change is anticipated in each respect. Income, race, possessions, and parental status are expected to diminish as influences on individual status. More and more rapid social mobility is expected, as are more heterogeneous neighborhoods. Despite the

shift, income will remain an important factor.

There was extensive disagreement about religion in the present society; as a result the composit ratings are almost neutral as to whether most people are basically religious, whether religion influences daily life, whether religious people are more highly regarded than others, and whether those attending religious services are more highly regarded than others. In each respect, the future society is expected to be less religious. A substantial minority disagreed, but a significant trend toward a more secular society was anticipated.

If educators heed students, career education will be the curricular wave of the future. (Time does not permit a description of career education, but it is not vocational education.) Students saw job preparation as a major purpose of contemporary education. Males expected this purpose to be equally important in future, while females expected a significant change toward even more emphasis on job preparation. Socialization as a purpose of education, strong today, is expected to be strong in future despite a predicted significant decline in importance.

As for job themselves, students believed that most people today do not find their jobs personally satisfying, but expected a significant favorable shift for themselves in future. Similarly, they believed most jobs are dull and boring at present, but again predicted a shift for their generation. Substantial minorities disagreed for both present and future, but for the majority, work is a four letter word. Present workers were viewed as preferring large organizations in which they have job security but make few decisions. Students were uncertain about their future, being almost evenly split in what they expected of future workers as to their preferences in their jobs.

In general, student attitudes toward the contemporary working world were negative. While optimistic about the future, there seems to be little in most current educational programs to warrant their optimism or to fulfill what students see as a major purpose of education, preparation for a job. And as will be detailed later, lower socioeconomic class students do not share the optimism of others.

Students saw contemporary American society as highly competitive and violent, expected the future to be significantly less so, but nevertheless still highly competitive and violent. They also regarded the present society's structure as at least partially explaining high crime rates, and perceived punishment as the contemporary attempt to solve the problem. In future, they expected lower rates and better rehabilitation, but still expected future society to be crime ridden and were uncertain as to whether it would be basically punitive. Differences between ability groups were between low ability and other students, and in the same directions but less pronounced than among SES groups reported below. Most low SES students also were classified as low ability. It was concluded that differences between ability groups were primarily a consequence of SES rather than ability. Protestant, Catholic, and others did not differ significantly on any issues.

Social dynamite is latent inthe perceptions of future society of students of lower socioeconomic class. They differ significantly from other students in many respects. Their different expectations of future society that can be inferred include:

1. Family conflict between parents and adolescents.
2. Failure to provide adequate education for all.
3. No change in inadequate mental health treatment now provided.
4. No improvement in the quality of life.
5. Slow social mobility.
6. They do not expect most people to like their jobs.

7. They do not expect schools to provide adequate job preparation.

8. Concern for job security.

9. Boring jobs are expected.

10. A high incidence of violent crime is anticipated.

11. They are less confident that racial bias will decline.

For this group in particular, the clear curricular implication is the career education movement. As career education is defined by USOE, its objectives would counteract many aspects of alienation and lack of confidence in American society that are implicit in these data. Whether educational programs can be developed that will accomplish the objectives of career education is uncertain. The need for more effective programs is readily apparent, however.